

I LOVE SUNDAYS
“Sundays Can Change Your Eternity”
Matthew 16:13-18; II Corinthians 5:17-21

17Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!
18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **20** We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. **21** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Introduction

NPR radio had a story about a marketing executive from Colombia. The government of Columbia approached Jose Miguel Sokoloff with a challenging idea: run a marketing campaign that would convince leftist guerrilla rebels to demobilize and reenter society. A radio ad campaign was the result with testimonials from former rebels. But actors actually read them so the plan didn't work.

They tried a different approach. At nine strategic places in the jungle where the rebels traveled, they strung hundreds of Christmas lights on 75-foot tall trees. When the rebels walked by, a motion sensor flicked on the lights and a recorded message said, “If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home.” That campaign helped demobilize 331 rebels.

The next year the firm filled over 7,000 translucent plastic balls with small gifts and notes inviting the rebels to come home. As the rebels travelled by river, they saw them, lit up and floating on the river, coming towards them. They couldn't resist; they opened them and received the gifts and read the notes. Sokoloff said, “When you see all these lights floating down the river, slowly floating towards you, you're drawn to them.”

In the third Christmas season, the ad agency shone huge skylights up into the night air and ran the following message: “This Christmas follow the light that will guide you to your family and your freedom.”

I Love Sundays because they make better Mondays, make for better relationships, and today's theme: how Sundays can change your eternity. Because Jesus, the Christ, the Savior, the Lord invites us to come home.

I. Reconciliation (vs. 17-19)

The Bible says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.”

Our gracious God has had a strategy, a marketing plan to reach us with the invitation to be reconciled. Every human being, including me and you, has practiced “guerilla warfare,” had become “rebels” against God and his good intentions for our lives. There exists a huge gap between us and our Creator. The Bible is filled with the accounts of revolt. And let’s face it: human behavior can be “revolting!”

In the Garden, Adam and Eve said, “Let’s have some fruit.” Surviving the Flood, Noah said, “Let’s get drunk and naked.” To protect himself, Abraham tells Sarah, “Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well.” Joseph incites his older brothers and they said, “Come, let’s sell him to the Midianite merchants.” And we have only come to the end of the first book of the Bible.

Old and New Testaments divulge the failings and malfunction of even the best of God’s people. The religious leaders, the fishermen, and the early church do not fare much better.

Yet over millennia, God’s grace flows, then and now, to them and to us. The Lord will not give up on his saving, redemptive love. Forgiveness will rule the day through Jesus. God is with us and God is for us.

A nominee for Best Picture, the film *Revenant*, tells the loosely based on true story of Hugh Glass (played by Leonardo DiCaprio). If you are still going to see it, plug your ears because here’s the plot. In 1823, a fur trapper is attacked and severely wounded by a grizzly bear while hunting on the Western Frontier. His friends intentionally leave him for dead and then murder his son before his eyes. According to the film's version of the story, Glass emerges from his grave and treks 80 miles on foot to hunt down and kill the men who betrayed him.

But according to blogger Irwin Jerome, in the real story, Glass travels all that way to comfort and forgive his betrayers. Michael Punke who wrote the book *The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge* claims that the forgiveness narrative would be way too boring for Hollywood. As Julian Brooks says on the *Mockingbird* blog, “Is forgiveness too boring for Hollywood? It’s understandable that Glass would want to avenge the death of his son and his own betrayal. ... Who could really forgive in that situation? Those men deserved to die. And nothing is more compelling for us than vengeance. ... Forgiveness on the big screen is apparently no match for retaliation. It's just too anti-climactic.”

Irwin Jerome concludes by saying, “Most creative treatments of the High Glass story have focused solely or mainly on the aspect of revenge. But in the current 21st century, with so much rampant terror, violence and revenge being carried out against peoples everywhere, what the world desperately needs most at this moment are not more books and films that herald revenge but that instead herald forgiveness and transcendence.”

“It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. “In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them” (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19). Ultimately, God will not tolerate the rejection of his love, life, goodness or mercy.

However, the Bible is clear: God is a gracious, loving, merciful God. Who would have guessed? That great declaration in John 3:15 (yes 3:15), “That everyone who believes may have eternal life.” Then John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And Paul writes here in II Corinthians, “All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah. He gives us a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins, not counting our sins against us.”

I Love Sundays because this message of grace needs to be visited and revisited again and again for us and others to realize God’s forgiveness in Christ. Only God can change one’s eternity. But Sundays can help.

II. Making an Appeal (vs. 20-21)

Then the Bible takes the next step: “The Lord has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

For centuries, the western church has seen much of the world as a mission field; properly so, and still does. But now, our culture is also a mission field. There are thousands of people in Salt Lake City who don’t know the biblical Jesus or who have rejected him or just have not had this gospel of grace articulated in the right, true way.

Did you hear and do you accept the assignment? We are, you and I, Christ’s representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women. “We implore you,” it says. Speaking for Christ himself now, God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing.

One writer (Martin Saunders *Christianity Today*) suggests that sharing Christ with others is a bit like dancing at a wedding. “You know you ought to do it; maybe you even want to do it. But deep down you’re worried you’ll do it wrong, that people will laugh, and that awkward videos of your failure will end up on YouTube. Alright, maybe that’s stretching it a bit – but the fact remains that conversing with someone about your faith in Jesus can feel awkward and difficult, and so instead of getting up to dance, we often end up spending the evening locked in the corner talking to Uncle Ken about his Koi carp collection. And no-one wants that.”

Because simply talking to our friends (or strangers) can feel socially difficult, Christians have developed new strategies for outreach which we hope will do the job for us. The article I read says that these strategies have one thing in common – they’re terrible, and they probably won’t work.

You know the fish thing. Putting an ancient Ichthus symbol on the bumper of your Mazda or Mercedes is not going to lead people to suddenly discover Jesus on the inside lane of the I-15. Instead, why not use your car to help people. Offer lifts. Car-share. And talk about what your faith means to you.

I'm pretty sure that no one has ever come to faith because they met someone in the street wearing a "Carpenter from Nazareth seeks joiners" T-shirt. A slightly better idea... Dress well, and end the rumor or reality that Christians have the fashion sense of a Teletubby. Then actually talk to your friends about your life and theirs, your interests and theirs along with your faith.

I Love Sundays because they give me a concrete experience I can share with people in my life. A simple conversation about "In church on Sunday..."

Conclusion

At some point, talk about something large or small where you have messed up. And tell about the relief, the goodness of forgiveness. Tell someone about Columbia's government or share the Hugh Glass story of what the movie *Revenant* missed. From any Sunday here at 1st Presbyterian Church, you can speak of something from the sermon, a story you heard, a feeling you had, a friend you met, a project the church is doing.

And at some point, you can say, "I love Sundays."

Let's pray together with eternal thanks to the Lord for his saving mercies and for the opportunities we have to love people around us with the message.

Matthew 16: 13-18

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" **14** They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."**15** "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" **16** Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." **17** Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. **18** And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it.